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COUNTRIES AND PEOPLES

MONTSERRAT

Working paper prepared by the Secretariat

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MONTSERRAT 1/

I. GENERAL

1. Montserrat is situated in the Leeward Islands in the eastern Caribbean, 43 kilometres south-west of Antigua and 64 kilometres north-west of the French Overseas Department of Guadeloupe. It has a maximum length of 18 kilometres and a maximum width of 11 kilometres, and covers an area of 103 square kilometres. The capital of Montserrat is Plymouth.

2. Montserrat is mountainous and of volcanic formation. In July 1995, Soufriere Hills volcano, dormant for more than 400 years, erupted, causing evacuation of more than a third of Montserrat's population from the southern part of Montserrat to its northern "safe" areas in August 1995.

3. As at May 1996, in the eleventh month of intensive volcanic activity, the Territory is facing an uncertain future with a substantial part of its population relocated and its economy disrupted. The problems caused by the volcanic eruption compounded the Territory's difficult recovery from severe damage caused by hurricane Hugo in 1989 and hurricanes Luis and Marilyn which struck Montserrat in early September 1995, the latter causing damage estimated at $5 million.

II. CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

4. Information on constitutional and political developments in the Territory is contained in the previous working paper prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/2019, paras. 5-16).

III. ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

5. The short review of economic conditions in the Territory which follows covers activities before the eruption of Soufriere Hills volcano in July 1995, which severely disrupted the everyday life of the inhabitants of Montserrat.

6. During 1994, the economy of the island experienced slight growth with improved performance in the main sectors - tourism, construction, manufacturing and agriculture. Efforts to constrain recurrent expenditure resulted in improved fiscal performance, and indirect tax collection benefited from the increased import levels brought about by the general improvement in economic performance.

7. Total production of the major agricultural crops increased in 1994 in comparison with the previous year by about 6 per cent. The Government continued to encourage diversification and increased productivity of food crops, for both domestic consumption and export. The agricultural sector accounted for under 10 per cent of Montserrat's gross domestic product in 1994.

8. Construction activity in 1994 was dominated by public sector investment, but was well supported by private sector projects. Work continued on the rehabilitation of the old and new Glendon hospitals, and the construction of the new Government headquarters building. Rehabilitation of the Bethel Primary School and the Cork Hill Road was substantially completed as well. New activity in 1994 included start-up of construction on the Teacher Resource Centre and Harris Primary School. Private sector activity in 1994 included work on a new rice milling facility, which commenced operations in 1995.

9. In the field of financial services, the Government was considering the development of the offshore sector, concentrating principally on the registration of international business companies. The objective was to rebuild the financial services sector in an environment emphasizing compliance with the laws of Montserrat and the existing international conventions of which the island is a signatory.

10. In 1994 there were clear signs of recovery in the manufacturing sector, with increased production and export of electronic parts and plastic furniture. Domestic exports for 1994 totalled EC$5.8 million, compared with EC$1.5 million in 1993, an increase of almost 20 per cent. Electrical parts exported to Ireland and the United States of America, and plastic furniture to the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) market, represented the major portion of total exports.

11. In 1994, the tourism sector represented the most important source of economic activity for Montserrat, with total visitor arrivals increasing by 13 per cent. The total number of visitors that year was 36,267. The number of stay-over visitors increased by 8 per cent, to 23,605. The number of visitors from the United States increased by 22 per cent in 1994. Overall visitor arrivals by sea amounted to 13,308 in 1994, representing a 39 per cent increase. The completion of jetty rehabilitation works at the port has contributed to the recovery in cruise ship tourism. In 1994 there were projections for continuing strong growth in 1995 and 1996.

12. The outlook for sustained improvement of the economy of Montserrat was positive. A detailed programme for the reorganization of the offshore financial sector was formulated during 1995, with forecasts for good growth prospects. Construction of a mineral water bottling plant was scheduled for late 1995, and both regional and international export markets have been targeted for product sales. 2/

IV. SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS

13. Information on social and educational conditions in the Territory is contained in the previous working paper prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/2019, paras. 48-56).

V. PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND ARRANGEMENTS

14. The Territory continues to be a member of CARICOM and the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), as well as of the institutions associated with

both groups, including the University of the West Indies, the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) and the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB). Montserrat is an associate member of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean and its subsidiary bodies. The Territory is represented at the meetings of the Caribbean Group for Cooperation in Economic Development, sponsored by the World Bank.

VI. FUTURE STATUS OF THE TERRITORY

Position of the territorial Government

15. The position of the territorial Government on the future political status of Montserrat was outlined in a previous working paper on the Territory prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/1137, paras. 13-16). To summarize, the Chief Minister reportedly stated that independence was not a priority; as the Territory became more economically self-reliant, it would then be in a position to move towards independence. He expressed a preference for the Territory to become independent within an OECS political union, an idea that is currently under consideration. That position remained unaltered during the period under review.

Consideration by the General Assembly

16. A summary of the position of the administering Power towards its dependent Territories is contained in previous working papers prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/1137, para. 17; A/AC.109/1180, paras. 30-36; and A/AC.109/2043, paras. 41-43).

17. On 6 December 1995, the General Assembly adopted resolution 50/38 B, a consolidated resolution on 12 Non-Self-Governing Territories, section VII of which was specifically devoted to Montserrat.

VII. SITUATION FOLLOWING THE ERUPTION OF SOUFRIERE HILLS VOLCANO

18. According to the information provided by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to the House of Commons in February 1996, the administering Power, through the official aid programme, had committed £4.6 million since July 1995 to meet the emergency caused by the volcanic eruption. Monitoring and assessment of the existing funding is accomplished through the Governor's office, which is assisted by a full-time consultant from the Overseas Development Administration and visits from the regional office in Barbados. The Secretary of State stated that further funds would be made available if necessary. He also estimated that up to 1,000 Montserratians had left the island, most of whom were working elsewhere in the Caribbean. There were no figures available on the number of households involved. The administering Power also formulated a range of plans for different situations and the lessons learned from two recent evacuations into the northern safe zone were influencing continuing preparations for any third such event. According to the Secretary of State, owing to the cooperation of the Government of Antigua, facilities exist on Antigua should evacuation of Montserrat be necessary. 3/

19. Following the volcano's eruption, the United Nations Development Programme Resident Representative effectively coordinated response measures with the assistance of the United Nations disaster management team and in close cooperation with the office of the Governor.

20. The Government of Montserrat continued to focus attention on making the designated safe area of Montserrat not only a comfort zone, but a new centre of life and business. National initiatives included the erection of prefabricated buildings to alleviate the strain on community centres, church and school buildings which have been converted to temporary shelters; the construction of an ancillary hospital; establishment of a safe area power station; upgrading fuel storage; acquisition of land for the relocation of livestock farms; road repairs; programmes for sports and culture, counselling and guidance. The business community and non-governmental organizations have submitted their plan of action for government support as they maintain efforts to rejuvenate business outlets opened in the north since July 1995.

21. Implementation of the wide range of contingency measures for both the private and public sectors on Montserrat is effectively creating a new centre of activity on about 20 square miles of land in north Montserrat. No plan for mass off-island evacuation for the some 10,000 people of this 39.5 square mile Caribbean island is being implemented. The Government is however facilitating a system of voluntary evacuation which has gained the support of the British and CARICOM Governments.

22. Chief Minister Reuben Meade says his Government is amenable to offering Montserratians a range of options for dealing with the current crisis. He believes that advantage of the voluntary evacuation option may be taken by "a number of residents while others may wish to stay and struggle it out and continue with the rebuilding process". According to the Chief Minister, there is no wish to hold people hostage to a situation from which they can take a break and return later to rejoin the island's redevelopment programme.

23. Arrangements for voluntary evacuation to the United Kingdom include eligibility for employment, income support, housing and enrolment of Montserratian children in British schools for two years in the first instance. Non-Montserratian residents who have been living on the island for a long time are also being considered on a case-by-case basis.

24. The latest response comes amidst concerns about the increasing strain being put on the sparse infrastructure in the north as scientists at the Montserrat Volcano Observatory maintain that the current state of instability at the Soufriere Hills volcano could persist over months or years. Governor Frank Savage reaffirmed at a press conference on 23 April 1996 that the British relief effort does not indicate a move towards off-island evacuation for everyone.

25. While residential areas, mainly on the flanks of the volcano comprising Montserrat's east, west and south coast, remain danger areas, a 1987 Wadge and Isaac's study/report on the Soufriere Hills volcano has been reviewed and validated by the Montserrat Volcano Observatory. The Observatory's current hazard map designates the north as a safe haven even in a worst-case eruption

scenario. The Government and most of the island's population remain confident that north Montserrat is a safe area. The Head of the Observatory, William Ambeh, believes that a complete off-island evacuation would not be necessary.

26. Since 3 April 1996, some 1,381 residents of Montserrat have been living in shelters. Another 3,000 people are renting accommodation or sharing the homes of friends and relatives in areas stretching from Cork Hill north across St. John's to the W. H. Bramble airport, which remains open. 4/

27. The Government Information Unit of Montserrat reported that on 12 May 1996 an increase in volcanic activity occurred with major ashclouds and ashfalls associated with three pyroclastic flows in the Tar River area of east Montserrat. At least one flow was reported to have entered the sea. The major ashfalls also affected areas within the designated safe zone including Cork Hill, Weekes', Olveston and Barzey's in the island's north. 5/

28. According to the latest available Daily Report prepared by the Observatory (29 May 1996), the current level of activity at the Soufriere Hills volcano continues to cause concern to the scientists. 6/

Notes

1/ The information contained in the document has been derived from published reports. This working paper is an update of the previous working paper prepared by the Secretariat (A/AC.109/2019 and Add.1).

2/ 1996 Caribbean Basin Commercial Profile, p. 266.

3/ House of Commons. Official Report. Parliamentary Debates (Hansard), 26 February 1996, col. 331.

4/ Government Information Unit. Volcano Alert: Overseas Resettlement Relief for Montserratians, 24 April 1996.

5/ Government Information Unit. Volcano Alert: Pyroclastic Flows and Major Ashfalls, 12 May 1996.

6/ Montserrat Volcano Observatory, Daily Report. Report for the period 16:00 28 May to 16:00 29 May 1996.